History of The Big Fresno Fair

The Road to Becoming the State's 5th Largest Fair!

The Big Fresno Fair has been a cornerstone of the Central Valley since 1884, when local ranchers, growers and business leaders first came together to celebrate agriculture, community and tradition. What began as a small gathering with horse racing, livestock and produce exhibits has grown into California's fifth largest fair, attracting more than 500,000 visitors annually.

Through economic challenges, world wars, a pandemic and decades of change, The Big Fresno Fair has endured, continually evolving to reflect the people, culture and history of Fresno County while remaining one of the region's most cherished traditions.

Note: Some of the information used for "History of The Big Fresno Fair" was taken from "Windows of the Past" composed by Liz Laval.

Here is chronological list highlighting some of the events in The Big Fresno Fair's history:

Early 1880's	The idea of a fair came to the forefront when men of the Valley met at neighborhood gatherings or passed the time of day at one or more of the "colony" stores where provisions were brought.
December 21, 1882	The Fresno District Fair was organized by a group of agricultural and business leaders.
December 26, 1882	Fresno Fairgrounds Association Incorporated.
February 1883	One hundred acres, located two miles east of what was then known as Fresno Colony, was purchased from Thomas E. Hughes for $5,000.
October 7-11, 1884	The First Fresno Fair was held. It ran five days and consisted mainly of a horse racing meet for trotters, a livestock department and a few small produce exhibits.
1887	California State Legislature created the 21st District Agricultural Association.
1888	The Fresno Fair Grounds Association reincorporated.
1888	Popular Best Baby Show was held. For many years, the Valley honored its fairest babies, beginning as early as 1888. The annual Best Baby Show attracted up to several hundred entries. Physicians examined the youngsters in the Baby Pavilion, and physical and mental standards were of primary value. Babies were stripped and placed in the hands of a nurse for a doctor to determine their finer points. Winners were presented with cash prizes, sterling silver drinking cups or tiny gold rings.
1889	A new fair corporation, operating under State supervision was created.

June 27, 1895	Fair properties were sold at foreclosure sale.
February 15, 1901	A committee was appointed to look into the feasibility of purchasing the fairgrounds by the County of Fresno. The purchase was made for $30,000, and Fresno County became the owner of the property.
1904	Barney Oldfield raced on the old fair dirt track in his Peerless Green Dragon. He set a world record in a 50-mile competition at the Fairgrounds.
December 14, 1907	The Fresno Fairgrounds were leased to the Fresno Agricultural Association for a term of five years. The annual rental to be paid was $1,800.
1909	After the Legislature abolished pari-mutuel betting in 1909 and auto racing moved into the picture, local horse racing temporarily ceased in 1910.
April 1912	Glenn L. Martin was at the controls of a 1912 vintage air machine. Martin made the nation's first air express flight leaving the Fresno Fairgrounds with a bundle of *Fresno Morning Republican* newspapers destined for the city of Madera. Twenty-four minutes after taking off, his cargo was parachuted to waiting newsboys and he began his return trip. Strong headwinds caused the aeroplane to run out of gas, and Martin glided the final three-quarters of a mile to the fairgrounds, establishing another world record; this for the longest reported glide distance without a motor.
1914	Schoolgirl Aviatrix thrills Fairgoers. At intermission time during the races, fans had an unexpected thrill when the nineteen-year-old Katherine Stinson Aviatrix flew passes over the Fairgrounds and then landed in front of the grandstand.
March 30, 1932	The Chamber of Commerce was looking for ways to cut expenses and suspended the Fresno Fair. The Tulare-Fresno Fair, held in Tulare, became the only fair conducted in the Valley south of Stockton in 1932.
1933	The Fresno County Junior Farm Bureau staged a Fair. They were granted permission from the Board of Supervisors with the stipulation that no monetary support could be expected. Security First National Bank loaned FCJFB money to reactivate the Fresno Fair.
August 1934	The 21st Agricultural Association entered into a five-year agreement to handle overall Fair operations. This agreement was renewed in 1939 for another five years.
March 2, 1937	The Board of Supervisors approved a 40-year lease with the 21st District Agricultural Association for the fairgrounds.
January 1941	The 21st Agricultural Association was forced to run its own fair as a State ordered change.

October 5, 1941	The 1941 Fresno District Fair established its claim as the largest district fair in the United States by playing host to 146,157 persons since the gates were opened.
Late 1941	The Fresno County Junior Fair Board (FCJFB) changed its name to Fresno District Fair Association.
December 7, 1941	U.S. Army occupied the Fair's district office and began preparing to convert the grounds into war-time emergency facilities.
May 11, 1942	Fairgrounds became a dispersal center for interned Japanese-Americans.
November 9, 1942	Fresno Fairgrounds were transferred from Wartime Civil Control Administration as an agency of Western Defense Command to Fourth Air Force Technical Training Command.
January 15, 1947	C. Todd Clark, chairman of the Board of Supervisors, nipped the ribbon, returning the fairground to Fresno County. The same day, a telegram came from the War Department canceling the return of the property. The actual takeover came three months later.
1948	The Fair emerged reborn and financially robust, thanks to the efforts of Manager Thomas A. Dodge and the 21st District Agriculture Association.
September 8, 1948	The Fair's Cotton Industry Display highlighted the "Cotton Dollar," showing how each dollar circulated through seven hands before leaving Fresno County. From farm workers and equipment dealers to banks, retailers, and local businesses, the exhibit illustrated cotton's vital role in sustaining jobs and income across the community.
October 5-15, 1961	Alice W. Lowrie, one of California's best-known women in agriculture, made history as the first female livestock judge at the Fresno Fair. Serving as public affairs officer at UC Davis, she judged goats and brought decades of experience in agricultural public relations, along with hands-on expertise from managing her own livestock ranch in Lake County.
2020	The outbreak of COVID-19 turned the world upside down. Public events ceased to operate, which included the 250+ year-round events held on the Fairgrounds and its traditional, in-person Big Fresno Fair. Instead, the Fair pivoted to survive and held "Drive-Thru Eats" – a drive-through Big Fresno Fair experience filled with delicious Fair food, roaming entertainers, two stages with live music and performances from local acts and virtual competitive exhibits. The Fair did manage to have a modified, in-person livestock show and sale for the hard-working 4-H and FFA students.

2021	The Big Fresno Fair made its return to an in-person event in 2021 – bringing the beloved tradition back for the community to enjoy. It won the top award in the Fair industry – the Merrill Award – for its work with the Fresno County Department of Public Health on its "Health & Safety Public Outreach Campaign" to return to in-person events safely.
2024	In June 2024, The Big Fresno Fair announces for the first time, it will have 14 days of live horse racing, double the number of race dates held in 2023. The 2024 Fresno race dates started in September before the annual Fair began. This historic race day allocation came after the California Horse Racing Board (CHRB) approved plans by the California Authority of Racing Fairs (CARF) to create year-round racing in Northern California under the new Golden State Racing organization. This move was designed to keep live horse racing in Northern California after the closure of Golden Gate Fields on June 9, 2024.
June 2025	The California Horse Racing Board (CHRB) declined Fresno's request for 2025 thoroughbred racing dates by a 4–3 vote and also rejected similar proposals from other Northern California fairs—including Ferndale and Sonoma—meaning no Northern California fairs were approved for live racing in 2025. Despite strong local support and a proposed operational plan with Bernal Park Racing, LLC, the Fair remains committed to preserving this longstanding tradition and is focusing on pursuing opportunities to bring live racing back in 2026.

With more than 500,000 visitors each year, The Big Fresno Fair is not only California's fifth largest fair, but also the Central Valley's largest annual event. Guided by a commitment to innovation, education and community pride, the Fair continues to serve as a reflection of Fresno County's diverse culture and agricultural heritage – while looking ahead to create new traditions for future generations.